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## IS THE DIVINE NAME IN HEBREW EVER EQUIVALENT TO THE SUPERLATIVE?

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This investigation was suggested by an article in the *Revue biblique*, October, 1901, entitled "Le nom divin est-il intensif en Hébreu?" The author (M. Prat) of this paper sums up his argument by saying, that there is not a single certain example of the use of the divine name as an augmentative or superlative, and that it never forms an epithet, but is simply an objective or possessive genitive in every instance. In these conclusions the views of most of the leading grammarians and lexicographers are antagonized. Davidson<sup>1</sup> maintains that "a kind of superlative sense is given to a word by connecting it with the divine name. Probably the idea was that God *originated* the thing (as Arabic), or that it belonged to Him and was therefore extraordinary." König<sup>2</sup> takes the same position. According to him the superlative degree is expressed "durch Charakteristik einer Erscheinung als einer dem Urtheile der Gottheit entsprechenden, oder zu ihr in *specieller Beziehung* stehenden (von ihr begründet, etc.)." The principal Hebrew lexicons<sup>3</sup> in discussing the words אֱלֹהִים and אֱלֹהִים advocate the same position as these grammarians. Green<sup>4</sup> takes the opposite view as follows: "But in all such cases there is a direct reference to the divine Being, גִּבּוֹר צִיד, גִּבּוֹר יְהוָה Gen. 10:9 is not merely *a very valiant hunter*, one so to speak on a superhuman scale or in the divine estimation, but with the superadded thought of attracting the notice and displeasure of Jehovah."<sup>5</sup>

Are all these authorities on the Hebrew language guilty of inconsistency in their interpretation, and do they select the

<sup>1</sup> Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax*, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> König, *Syntax der heb. Sprache*, pp. 316 *sqq.*

<sup>3</sup> Gesenius, *Thesaurus*; Fürst, Buhl; and the *Oxford Lexicon*, אֱלֹהִים, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Green, *Hebrew Grammar*, p. 298.

<sup>5</sup> The grammars of Ewald, Harper, and Gesenius-Kautzsch, and the lexicon of Siegfried and Stade do not touch this point of syntax.

examples in support of this rule somewhat at haphazard as the writer in the *Revue biblique* thinks, or do the facts of the language, a reasonable exegesis and comparative grammar support the view that the divine name has the force of a superlative at times? These questions can be satisfactorily answered, only after a careful consideration of the various passages adduced to support this rule of syntax. Now let us pass them in review with this grammatical principle in view.

1. In Gen. 10:9 (Kön., Dav.) of Nimrod it was said **גבור ציד לפני יהוה**. Usage determines the exact meaning of the phrase **לפני יהוה**; it frequently signifies "in the presence of Yahweh," as in Gen. 27:7; Exod. 27:21, but here this is palpably not the meaning of the phrase. Elsewhere, as in Josh. 6:26 and Ps. 19:15, it is equivalent to "in the estimation of Yahweh," which exactly suits the context. The implication is that, if Nimrod was a mighty hunter in the opinion of Yahweh, how much greater would he be in the estimation of men. There is certainly an idea of supereminence in the use of the divine name in this connection. There is not the slightest tinge of disapproval or displeasure, as Green would have us believe.

2. Gen. 13:13 (Kön.), **רעים והטאים ליהוה מאד**. The use of the divine name seems to be redundant in this verse, as sinners in the view of the writer would be those who had transgressed the laws of Yahweh. And yet it is to be remembered that pleonasm is not uncommon in Hebrew. On the other hand, as the **מאד** by itself gives a superlative idea, Yahweh may have been mentioned because of the very abrupt introduction of the subject.

3. Jon. 3:3 (Buhl, Dav., Kön.), **עיר גדולה לאלהים**. What has been said of (1) holds good of this passage. An Arabic idiom throws some light on this use of the divine name with preposition **ל** prefixed. In Arabic we find such phrases as **لِلّٰهِ فُلَانٌ**, **لِلّٰهِ اَلْقَائِلُ**, **لِلّٰهِ دَرَّةٌ** which mean how excellent is his deed, how good or beautiful the saying of the sayer, etc. The Arabic idiom makes a corresponding usage in Hebrew at least possible. In the use of the divine name in the three passages just considered, there is certainly no contrast between God's estimation and man's view in the sense maintained by M.

<sup>6</sup> Lane, *Arab. Lex.*, Vol. I, p. 83.

Prat:<sup>7</sup> "c'est l'avoir réellement et non seulement pour les hommes, qui sont dupes des apparences, mais pour celui-la même qui sonde les reins et les cœurs."

4. Gen. 23:6 (Kön.), נְשִׂיא אֱלֹהִים אַתָּה. Dillmann interprets this correctly as "ausgezeichnet, herrlicher Fürst." The LXX βασιλεὺς παρὰ θεοῦ has missed the exact meaning, for the sons of Heth did not make their hospitable offer to Abraham because they recognized him as a prince especially appointed by God, but rather as a man possessing princely qualities in an extraordinary degree.

5. Gen. 30:8 (Kön., Ges.), נַפְחוּלִי אֱלֹהִים. This may be interpreted in two ways. It may mean that Rachael had wrestled with her sister in a severe and mighty conflict, or that she had wrestled with God for grace and blessing that she might prevail against her sister. Consequently it is too ambiguous to be cited in support of a grammatical principle.

6. 1 Sam. 14:15 (Kön., Dav.), וַתְּהִי לַחֲרֹת אֱלֹהִים. The context makes it clear, that the divine name is used in more than a mere superlative sense. Jonathan and his armor-bearer perform a deed of valor, which is followed by a panic heightened by an earthquake. Hence the fear and rout of the Philistines was due directly to supernatural intervention. The R. V. "an exceeding great trembling" scarcely gives the force of the original; the LXX καὶ ἐγενήθη ἔκστασις παρὰ κυρίου is better. The fear and trembling that fell on the Philistines was not simply a very great one, but it was sent directly by God. Gesenius refers to Gen. 35:5 יִרְהִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים in support of the principle under discussion. This fear is also supernatural; cf. 2 Chron. 20:29; Zach. 14:13.

7. 1 Sam. 26:12 (Dav., Kön.), תִּרְדַּמַּת יְהוָה. This genitive is clearly subjective, denoting the origin or source of the sleep. The narrative indicates that it was due to the direct intervention of Yahweh that the deep sleep fell on Saul. If there is any superlative idea, it is in the word תִּרְדַּמַּת itself.

8. Isa. 14:13 (Buhl, *Oxford Lex.*), מִמַּעַל לְרוֹכְבֵי אֵל אֲרִים. In this connection there would be no reason for bringing out the creative power of El as shown in his creation of the stars, but it is in point to emphasize the extreme loftiness of the stars where El is enthroned. The arrogance of the king of Babylon prompts him to raise his throne to the same soaring height.

<sup>7</sup> RB., Vol. X, p. 498.

9. Jer. 2:31 (Kön.), **מֵאֶפְלָיָהּ**. This word has often been regarded as a theophorous compound, but König himself considers this extremely doubtful. It may be pointed as an adjective, **מֵאֶפְלָיָהּ** (Stade),<sup>8</sup> and hence it cannot be cited in support of a rule of syntax.

10. Mal. 2:15 (Kön.), **מִבְּקֶשׁ זֶרַע אֱלֹהִים**. This is a passage too obscure to be made the basis of an induction. The expression "a godly seed" may either express the divine purpose of marriage or be a designation of Isaac. The **אֱלֹהִים** is a genitive of quality, but cannot be equivalent to a superlative.

There are several passages in which such expressions as "mountains or mountain of God," "tree or cedars of God" occur. No discriminating exegesis will deny, that the term "mountain of God" applied to Horeb has no possible reference to its altitude, or that "the tree of God" might have reference to the belief in an indwelling *numen*. Nevertheless it remains true that in poetry we must allow for some play of the poet's imagination, without extracting philosophical theories and comparative religions from his imagery. It is necessary to keep this principle in view in considering the following passages from the Psalms:

Ps. 36:7 (Ges., Dav., Kön., Buhl, *Oxford Lex.*), **צִדְקָתְךָ כְּהָרֵי אֵל**. The force of this comparison is very apparent, when we regard "mountains of El" as a poetic figure, expressing the supereminent stability of the righteousness of Yahweh. The exegesis of the writer in the *Revue biblique* seems forced. According to him such expressions, where the theory of an ancient sanctuary will not answer, are equivalent to saying that the vegetation on the mountains is primeval, the direct product of God's hands without the intervention of man at all. If such an interpretation be adopted, the comparison in this verse is meaningless.

11. It is not quite so clear in Ps. 68:16 (Buhl, Dav., Ges.) why the Mountains of Bashan are termed **הַר אֱלֹהִים**. Delitzsch thinks it was probably the basaltic and volcanic nature of the rocks that gained them this title, because such rocks produced the impression of antiquity and invincibility. They were, as compared with the softer limestone rock of western Palestine, the symbol of the world and its powers threatening the people of God. All this is a little doubtful; and it is simpler, at least,

<sup>8</sup> Stade, *Lehrbuch der heb. Grammatik*, § 302b.

to identify these mountains with Hermon,<sup>9</sup> which could be well termed the mountain of God because of sanctuaries located on it. At best the allusion is too obscure to be cited in support of a rule of syntax.

12. Ps. 80:11 (Buhl, Dav., Ges., Kön., *Oxford Lex.*), וַעֲנִפֶּיהָ אֵל אַרְזֵי אֵל ; Ps. 104:16 (Dav., Ges., Kön.), יִשְׁבְּעוּ עֵצֵי יְהוָה. In the latter passage there is no doubt that the expression "trees of Yahweh" is equivalent to trees planted by Yahweh, for the second member of the parallelism runs אַרְזֵי לְבִנוֹן אֲשֶׁר נָטַע. In the former case it is more plausible to regard the entire phrase as expressing the height to which the branches of the vine attain, but the two words אֵל אַרְזֵי might just as reasonably be interpreted as setting forth the idea, that they were the products of El's creative energy without the slightest reference to a superlative idea.

13. Ps. 45:7 (Kön.), כִּסֵּאךָ אֱלֹהִים עוֹלָם וְעַד. König no doubt follows those who insert כִּסֵּא in constructive state before *Elohim*, translating "Thy throne is a throne of *Elohim*." A throne like that of God, which would necessarily be super-eminent in its magnificence, grandeur, and pomp.

Job 1:16 (Buhl, Ges.), אֵשׁ אֱלֹהִים נִפְלָה מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם. Although "the fire of God" has been variously interpreted, yet a reasonable exegesis will recognize that here nothing more than a thunderbolt is referred to.

Cant. 8:6 (Kön., Dav.), רֶשֶׁפִּיהָ רֶשֶׁפִּי אֵשׁ<sup>10</sup> שְׁלֵה־בָתֶּיהָ. Hitzig<sup>11</sup> inserts a word and emends as follows: שְׁלֵה־בָתֶּיהָ שְׁלֵה־בָתֶּיהָ, and then interprets "Love's flames are flames of Yahweh," i. e., they are kindled by him and are in consequence independent of our lower nature. It is forced exegesis to suppose with Prat that in רֶשֶׁפִּי אֵשׁ the writer had any thought of the Phœnician god Rešeph, the hurler of lightning, with which Yahweh is parallel in the next clause. According to this the flames of Jehovah would be lightnings and thunderbolts. This is entirely too ingenious to be probable. One must take either the interpretation of Hitzig given above or follow the R. V. (margin), "a most violent flame."

In two passages, 2 Sam. 23:20;<sup>12</sup> 1 Chron. 11:22 (Kön.), we find הוּא הִכָּה אֶת שְׁנֵי אֲרִיֵּאל מוֹאָב. The LXX reading is original

<sup>9</sup> Baethgen, *Psalmen*, H. K. z. A. T., and Kirkpatrick, *The Psalms*, ad loc.

<sup>10</sup> Some write יָהּ separately.

<sup>11</sup> Hitzig, *Das Hohe Lied* ("Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch z. A. T.").

<sup>12</sup> LXX τοὺς δύο νιούς Ἀριῆλ τοῦ Μωάβ.

and the text is to be emended accordingly **את שני בני אריאל**. Then Ariel is a proper name occurring also in Isa. 29:1, where Jerusalem is addressed as Ariel. A summary dismissal of the subject by saying, that in theophorous nouns the relation between the two parts is always that of subject and predicate, may not pass unchallenged. Olshausen<sup>13</sup> gives a long list of proper names in which the second noun is genitive. The force of the compound may be best arrived at through Isa. 29:1, when Jerusalem is addressed as **אריאל** *i. e.*, a city not only lion-like<sup>14</sup> in strength, but endowed with power that is divinely potent. Hence in these two passages Ariel is the name of some Moabitish warrior noted for his great deeds of prowess.

1 Chron. 12:22 (Dav., Kön.), **כִּמְתַנֵּה אֱלֹהִים**. The context informs us that new recruits joined David's army daily, so that he called it the camp of God, as Jacob termed the angels that met him on his return from Mesopotamia. In the latter case, it was no doubt the character of the members of the camp that determined the name. They were superhuman beings. In this passage the divine name emphasizes the large numbers of the army, because the host of God is numerous in whatever sense it is taken. The expression is certainly superlative in this passage of Chronicles.

Before summing up the results of this study, a word as to comparative grammar is in point. With the exception of the Arabic analogy already alluded to, there is no similar construction in Arabic, Assyrian, or Syriac.<sup>15</sup> Of course this fact does not make it impossible for Hebrew to possess this idiom.

In conclusion we may sum up the results of our investigation as follows: Seven passages, Gen. 10:9; Jon. 3:3; Gen. 23:6; Isa. 14:13; Pss. 36:7; 45:7; 1 Chron. 12:22, upon a reasonable exegesis support the rule as given by Davidson and König; six, Gen. 35:5; 1 Sam. 14:15; 1 Sam. 26:12; Pss. 80:11; 104:16; Job 1:16, are more reasonably explained in other ways; eight, Gen. 13:13; 30:8; Jer. 2:31; Mal. 2:15; Ps. 68:16; Cant. 8:6; 2 Sam. 23:20; 1 Chron. 11:22, are for various

<sup>13</sup> Olshausen, *Lehrbuch. der Heb. Sprache*, p. 611.

<sup>14</sup> Gesenius, Ewald, Cheyne, Dillmann interpret **אריאל** as lion of God; others, Delitzsch, Orelli, make it equivalent to **הריאל**, Ezra 43:15 *sq.*; the latter is improbable.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, *Elements of Syriac Grammar*, p. 122, the superlative is expressed "*perhaps* in a few cases by means of **ܐܠܗܐ**." Very uncertain, as found only in Old Testament. Nöldeke does not mention this usage in his grammar.

reasons too doubtful to be cited in support of a rule of syntax which is otherwise so obscurely indicated. The sweeping statements of M. Prat, given at the opening of this paper, and obviously made in the interests of uniformity, cannot be supported by a judicious exegesis in every instance; while on the other hand, grammarians and lexicographers cite many passages in support of this principle which are not merely doubtful and obscure, but in many cases positively contradict the rule.